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ABSTRACT

In this document, personal experiences in counseling working women are recounted to add the dimension of personal ambivalence to the body of knowledge about discrimination against women, particularly the weak self-concept of women vis-a-vis their position in the work force. The paper begins with a discussion of role learning, in which women exist in a double bind which forces them to choose between being a healthy woman and a healthy human being, with the result that many women devalue themselves. Women's self-concept in relation to work is outlined in four categories of ambivalence: (1) guilt over allegiance to the wife/mother role; (2) allegiance to the feminist version of the correct female role; (3) self-identity and self-concept; and (4) the need to be validated by men. Illustrative anecdotes from case histories are presented with a description of treatment methods, consisting of exploring personal value systems relative to an ambivalent self-concept in the working world, and making choices between conflicting values. (CS)

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THE WORKING WOMAN AND SELF CONCEPT:
A GROWING AMBIVALENCE

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With the advent of women's issues has come a burgeoning of research and writing about women's unfair position in the working world. Managerial personnel have been shown, at all levels, to act discriminatorily. Although some women hold responsible positions in business, industry, education, the likelihood of equality with men in achieving such positions is a long way off.

Viewing this picture from the other side, however, offers a perspective which may be surprising. My practice with women has led me to conclude that females themselves are often an unwitting party to the employment picture. A woman's own self concept in relationship to her roles appears to play a part--perhaps a large part--in women's overall inferior position in the work force.

During the past ten years I have counseled more than one hundred women from the working world. I have come to believe that psychologists need to be constantly alert to the ambivalences of a woman's role concept, and that therapeutic strategies to deal with these dilemmas need to be developed.

Role Learning and the Values Associated

Some definitive studies have shown that women exist in a double bind where it is impossible to choose to be a healthy adult woman and at the same time a healthy human being (who would be defined by male traits) (Kaschak, 1976). Furthermore successful women have been shown to

view themselves as "imposters" who have fooled others into thinking they are intelligent (Clance and Imes, 1978). Other research indicates that females make unrealistically low evaluations of themselves compared with their own actual abilities and devalue other women's professional competence (Baruch and Barnett, 1975).

Subtly such self concept seems to have translated itself into the belief that if she works, a woman is not so good as a man, that she is given special privilege if she is allowed to hold a good job, that her organization "has been good" to her to allow her time to have a baby or to let her manage men. Such feelings appear to be a foundation for many growing ambivalences in a woman's mind in relation to success on the job. It appears likely that since these are her true feelings, a woman must convey these ambivalences to bosses, managers, and superiors, resulting in the possibility of undermining that manager's confidence in her as an employee.

Self Concept in Relation to Work--the Value System of the Woman

There appear to exist a series of ambivalences which roughly fall into four categories, all within the woman's self concept in relation to the right roles for her. To live with such uncertainty, unable to choose one side while believing that she should make up her mind, causes stress and may lead to deep depression.

The first category, I Want Success But It Will Hurt Me, may be

phrased in the dilemma between desiring to be a successful and worthy worker on the job versus doubt of her ability to equal men. It is complicated by underlying ambivalence about fear of competing with men, perhaps specifically her husband, and fear that if she is successful, she will become masculine and aggressive, adopting traits she considers unfeminine.

One of my clients, Betsy, is a woman in her forties who has been denied tenure at a University, for which situation she is bringing suit. While she clearly said that she wants her job renewed more than anything else, she also made such statements as, "I realize my doctorate isn't from one of the best colleges," and "I suppose my field (biology) is easier for a man with all the labs and late hours." Finally she discussed the fact that all the time she was growing up, she remembers her father saying that achieving women give him "the creeps." She saw that while a lot of her life had been spent in trying to prove to him she can achieve, at the same time she feared what he would feel if she were termed a successful woman. She concluded, "Really I do and I don't want that job." It seems reasonable to expect that such an ambivalence toward success on her job has been conveyed to her superiors as lack of commitment.

The second area of ambivalence, What Am I? relates to priorities in a woman's hierarchy of values in relation to who she is in the roles she plays. Is she a wife-mother who works, a nurse who is a wife? Does

she want to be ME first?

The dilemma of how to prioritize will be complicated often by a sense of anger at role overload. Although I have personally been living with a husband who respects me as a person, I feel the hackles rise when he refers to the activity he is engaged in as "your dishes." I remind him brusquely that they are indeed "our dishes." The woman often feels she must prove she can have success on the job while carrying all the responsibility for running the household.

This dilemma of priorities was exemplified in one of my clients, Maryann, who at age thirty-three had raised two children to early teens, and after anxiety and hyperventilation attacks was hospitalized. Later when she was ready to leave the hospital, she indicated she might not go home, but would return to her job to work "for myself for a change." Thus Maryann shifted from being a wife-mother who worked, to a cosmetician. But in so doing, she could not fit in the wife-mother role, believing she must make a distinct choice to give all her commitment to the job. She said clearly that she knew her male boss had questioned whether the job was enough of a priority in her life.

In the third group of ambivalences in my female clients, I have found the guilt particularly acute. This ambivalence, I Pledge Allegiance, is between being perfect wife and/or mother, and owing allegiance to what the feminists declare is the correct female role.

Rosie is divorced after almost twenty years of marriage. At eighteen she eloped and became pregnant immediately. At nineteen she had twin boys, and two years later another child.

Some of the comments she made during the three years I saw her regularly show her many ambivalences in the area of her self concept as giver versus viewing herself as the modern woman. "I look at my children, and I see their problems and know it's my fault. I should never have gone out working." "All the time I'm working, I wish I were sewing for the family and doing something creative in my home, but when I stop working and stay home, I feel smothered, as though I am just stagnating." Rosie wavered in and out of jobs for several years. We discussed the idea that unwittingly she was conveying to bosses the message that she had little idea who she is and that they therefore hesitated to advance her in her work.

She finally tried to solve the situation by becoming involved in a blatant affair which she discussed with her husband. Even when she drove him from the house, the old ambivalence remained. "How can I help my children now and still do for myself?" Her value system holds a real rift between what her overly conventional parents said and her picture of herself as the modern woman who deserves what the feminists proclaim are female rights such as a career which develops positive self concept (Hansen, 1974).

The fourth and final ambivalence for working women, Proof by

Male, is expressed in their sense of self esteem because of who they are and what they do versus their need to be validated by men. One study has found that when a woman seeks out a mentor who is male, she uses her total feminine charm to win his approval, all of which makes that approval meaningless (Clance and Imes, 1978).

Nancy is a woman in her mid-twenties just finishing graduate school. Her ministry training ends with an oral examination by a board empowered to recommend her for ordination and a church position. From the one woman on the board she expected a positive vote, though feeling the female opinion does not count.

Of Mr. Smith, the second member, Nancy commented that she could not read him.

"In other words, you haven't found a way to win him," I suggested.

She agreed with a smile of admission, then went on about the third member. "Every time I get near him, he makes some sexual innuendo. The last time I was in his office, he told me my blouse was too high in the neck, and he actually came over and tried to unbutton it."

She was certain he would vote for her and said she would dress a little sexy to be sure, thus conveying the very message she wished to avoid. But then she added that in the long run she would not know if she was really good, all their assessments being essentially meaningless. Nancy has not yet understood her ambivalence about self validation versus need of approval by men.

Further Steps in Treatment

In the above examples, as the first steps in treatment, I have attempted to show ways to promote self understanding in dealing with ambivalences which arise in the value systems of many working women, often causing stress, anxiety, and depression, and also undoubtedly exacerbating their already secondary positions in the working world. During this exploration it is therefore important to relate their ambivalent self concept to the messages they may be sending to male bosses.

The second step in the treatment which I have entered into with female clients is a fantasy based on the exigency that at some point the woman may be forced to make choices between home and job, between seeing herself as successful versus serving others. In this values clarification I suggest a number of questions, asking the women to fantasize what they would do in these show-down situations. Some examples are:

(1) If your boss wanted to appoint a man to a superior job for which you are both qualified because he has a big family and needs money, how would you feel and what would you do? (2) What would you do if you had a chance for a job which necessitated a lot of traveling and you had a small child?

These fantasies help the woman to realize that there may be times in her life that a choice between her ambivalences will be forced upon her. At the same time, I try to help each female to realize that unless such a point does arrive, she is an acceptable person if she avoids dealing with a choice.

This concept is the final area of the treatment. I call it Today's

Woman in Ambiguity where the value system remains unclear. I have found that many women feel compelled to make choices even when such a choice is not forced. Rosie lived in her dilemma, constantly pressing to be able to make a choice between doing what she wanted and serving her family, sinking into depression through her guilt. After engaging in various affairs and driving her husband out, she began to say, "So what if I work awhile, and then stay home awhile? That's not really terrible, and I'm not terrible. Other people may think it's crazy, but for me it works."

The feminist movement and consciousness raising have opened the possibilities for women to accept their real selves. As one writer puts it, women need to face their real feelings as not abnormal even if they comprise not liking child care or feeling superior to their husbands (Brodsky, 1973). Such admission of her feeling that a final choice between the ambivalences probably cannot and usually need not be made will give the woman an ultimate sense of rightness and self acceptance as she faces her own self concept with a hierarchy of values which in itself is ambivalent. This need not be the "plight" of modern working woman, but can be her challenge and a positive life experience.

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